

Congressmen tour Arsenal, tout missions

by Rachel Newton

During a congressional visit at the Pine Bluff Arsenal Feb. 11, U.S. Rep. Mike Ross, D-Ark., commented that his objective in inviting U.S. Rep. Vic Snyder, D-Ark and U.S. Rep. Ike Skelton to join him on the tour of PBA was to show the multi-missions that this installation serves for the protection of our country and our Soldiers. Both Snyder and Skelton currently serve on the House Armed Services Committee.

"Multi-functional military bases such as Pine Bluff Arsenal must stay open not only because they produce weapons for front-line Soldiers but also because it serves as a key center for the destruction of chemical weapons," said Ross during an afternoon brief press conference at the Clara Barton Center.

Pine Bluff Mayor Carl Redus, White Hall Mayor James "Jitters" Morgan, State Rep. Stephanie Flowers and Jefferson County Judge Jack Jones joined the congressional delegation during the tours.

During the morning tour, the congressmen received an overview briefing of the Arsenal as well as a chemical demilitarization update. They toured the Directorate of Ammunition Operations 120mm M930 Load and Pack (LAP) facility and the Pine Bluff Chemical Disposal Facility (PBCDF). Demonstrations of the colored smoke grenades and white phosphorus smoke were also presented outside the CBC. "We generally give them the whirlwind tour," said PBA Sgt. Maj. Jerry Curtiss, speaking to press members before the conference.

Ross reiterated that the end goal for the visit is to make sure that when the proposed list of bases slated for closure comes down, that PBA is not on that list. "I arranged for this visit so that Skelton and Snyder could see how diversified the Arsenal is and to save it from possible base closure," said Ross.

Later this year, the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) - a nine-member committee - will make recommendations about which military bases should be closed. After review and possible amendments, the President will forward the list of recommendations to Congress.

"We can have hearings all day long but unless we see how they make the munitions and dispose of them, we'll never understand how critical this is," said Skelton. "This is a first-class facility."

During the 1980s, Skelton, a ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee, promoted funding for binary weapon production at the Arsenal. The binary production towers were destroyed at PBA on Jan. 12.

"It is rather interesting to see cradle to the grave of this," remarked Skelton. "The bitter irony is that the weapons that kept the peace during the Cold War are being destroyed here."

In comments to the press, Ross said that he did not expect the Arsenal to be overlooked when President George Bush presents his budget for the war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. "I'm very cautiously optimistic that funding will be included in the supplemental appropriation bill," he said.

When asked about the study currently being conducted concerning the transport of munitions from other sites to PBA for destruction, Ross explained that number one it is just a study. "Because of the deficit everything is being studied," he said. "Quite frankly, I don't think it will ever happen. However, that is a separate issue and has nothing to do with our visit today. Today's visit is about trying to get more money for the Pine Bluff Arsenal and to make sure that it is not on the BRAC list."